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Picture Perfect

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Picture Perfect
Peter Bremer
The Reference Librarian, 59:3, 146-148, 2018.

Walking through Rodney A. Briggs Library at the University of Minnesota, Morris (UMM) one is struck by the number of artworks hanging on the walls. On every floor paintings, photographs or sculptures greet a visitor as they turn a corner. They run the gamut from woodcuts and watercolors to multimedia collages and impressionistic renderings. Some are small, like a tiny window to another world while others take up half the wall with colorful splendor. Taken together they help beautify our building, which is still waiting for possible renovations and dates back to the early 1970s. Best of all, nearly all the art gracing our walls was created by UMM students.

Although the tradition of purchasing student art for the library began before my tenure, I was happy to help continue it. For ten years I coordinated the purchase of student-created artwork. Pieces were carefully selected from our art department's Juried Art Exhibition and Senior Art Show each spring. Funds to pay for these creative works came out of collected overdue library fines, proving that anyone can be a backer of the arts. The selection process was relatively simple. Each year I would put together a small committee of library staff, students and university employees, including a studio art faculty member. Since there was almost always more volunteers than slots I would create a waiting list for the following year's selection committee.

On the appointed day of the art show opening, we would all meet together in the gallery to review the pieces. Since almost none of us were experts in art or technique we let our own sense of aesthetics and taste guide us. Printed price sheets were provided by the curator. Then the

fun began! Like kids in a candy store we would peruse the creations, marking down titles that caught our eye and were within our budget. Inevitably, there were always a few items that were not for sale (NFS) or a bit too expensive, but no matter. Each of us always had a long list of prospective purchases that we narrowed down through discussion and voting until a clear winner was finally decided.

The next step was notifying the artist of the selection. For most student artists this was the first piece they had ever sold. In addition, they received an official Briggs Library Art Award and the promise that their piece would be displayed in Briggs Library permanently. To say they were excited would be an understatement. As the unofficial chair of the Briggs Library Art Award Committee it usually fell to me to announce our selection at the opening ceremony of the art exhibit. This is where I would invariably thank those in attendance for bringing items back late to the library and congratulate the artist.

After a piece was selected and announced a home in the library had to be found. Sometimes this was almost as difficult as selecting a work of art. Certain pieces looked better in one spot over another, and in the beginning of our initiative we had much more available wall space to choose from. Librarians at Briggs do a lot of things, but securing paintings to walls isn't one of them. Talented folks from our Facilities office regularly pound holes in walls and do careful measuring. We left it in their capable hands to hang the work.

Meanwhile, I reached out to the artist and arranged a time to meet so I could gather information and take a picture for a news story for inclusion on our library website and social media. If the student was willing, we would also notify their hometown newspaper. Briggs Library Art Award winners were included in a campus-wide recognition ceremony. Most importantly, I also shared the crucial information necessary so the starving artist could collect

payment. It's always a joy to sit down and talk with an artist, learning about their process, inspiration and future plans. I always came away with a deeper insight into the award-winning work.

Other libraries have engaged in similar beautification projects, while at the same time putting their own twist on things. At the College of the Holy Cross boarded up atrium windows from a renovation became the impetus for a first-time collaboration between the science library and visual arts department. The result was a series of colorful scientifically-inspired paintings that were scanned into Photoshop and then enlarged so they could cover unsightly plywood (Merolli, 2009, p. 21). The University of Tennessee in Knoxville initiated a Student Art in the Library Juried Exhibition in a reference room. (Beals, 2007, p. 56) Kemp makes the observation that, "Almost all colleges and universities have acquired works of original art some time in their history" (1994, p. 163). This need not be limited to student artwork, of course. Since libraries tend to be rather inclusive they "have the potential to become sites for collecting and exhibiting art that for one reason or another is not readily accepted by traditional or mainstream institutions" (Kam, 2001, p. 13).

For our part, Briggs Library has been happy and willing to showcase the creative accomplishments of dozens as well as art work from faculty and members of the community. During a typical day I pass by many of the pieces and am reminded of the student or a snippet of conversation related to their work. In the woodcuts, photographs and paintings I see the dreams of young artists, their backgrounds and passions reflected in a brilliant sunflower, a Native American jingle dress, Hmong children standing in a field, the emerald green of a kelp forest, a colorful thumbprint, the swirling lines of an abstract painting, a brilliant sunrise in a canyon, tranquil lily pads and butterflies, towering robots as well as whispering doves. For our current

students, however, each piece simply enriches their surroundings, supplying a dash of color or a moment of distraction before diving back into their studies.

Although I no longer help to coordinate the purchase of artwork for the library I am always eager to see what is chosen next. Recently, our friends of the library group graciously agreed to take over the selection and funding of the Briggs Library Art Award. This has allowed the budget for art work to increase, putting more of students' creative endeavors within financial reach.

In addition, the library is pursuing a digitization project to chronicle and capture the art on display. This effort is led by our technical services librarian with support from work study students. Individual pieces have been photographed and measured, with biographical and technical details recorded in a spreadsheet. The next step will be to import this information into a searchable database that can be utilized internally by library staff. If copyright considerations permit the hope is to make the database available to the public at large as well. Eventually, we might even be able to include other artwork currently hanging in buildings throughout campus.

Until then, we're preparing for a new sculpture that will honor a former Briggs Library director. It is being commissioned by the family and features a man reading. Somehow I think he will feel right at home.

If you have student or talented community members creating artwork consider purchasing some. The impact on your library and patrons will be immediate and long-lasting.

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